

# Intellectual Environmental History of India: A Study on Ideas of Deen Dayal Upadhyay

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## Abstract

Environmental history emerged as an exciting historical inquiry in the last three decades in India. It mainly focuses on the relationship between human beings and nature in the past. Intellectual environmental history documents the ideas of intellectuals from ecological perspective. In this backdrop, this paper attempts to capture the ideas of Deen Dayal Upadhyay from ecological perspective. The philosophical outlook of Upadhyaya embedded fascinating views on the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. His writings reflect the deep spiritual relationship between culture and natural forms in India. This paper proposes that an attempt to document the ecological dimension of Upadhyay is useful in the context of his growing reputation as original nationalist thinkers in the contemporary India.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Hinduism, Decentralisation, Nature, Culture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a public intellectual and serious thinker of Indian society and culture, Deen Dayal Upadhyay offer exciting reflections and solutions on various aspects which are relevant in contemporary India. Ecological dimension to his ideas are useful in understanding the relationship between human beings and nature from ecological nationalist perspective. This paper attempts to capture his ideas from environmental history perspective and highlights their relevance to our contemporary times. This paper has been organised into three sections. The first section narrates the meaning of intellectual environmental history and locates the ideas of Deen Dayal Upadhyay in the ecological history. The second, section mentions about economic and ecological ideas of Upadhyay and final section highlight the contemporary relevance of ecological ideas of Upadhyay in India.

## 2. METHOD

This research paper employs a qualitative methodology to examine the ecological dimensions of Deen Dayal Upadhyay's ideas. Data collection involved a comprehensive review of Upadhyay's writings, including his published works, speeches, and philosophical discourses, to extract relevant ecological themes. Secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, and reviews related to Indian environmental history and intellectual thought were also reviewed to contextualize Upadhyay's ideas within broader historical and intellectual frameworks. Content analysis was used to identify and interpret key concepts related to ecology, culture, and nationalism in Upadhyay's thought. The analysis focused on understanding how Upadhyay's integral Hinduism integrates ecological consciousness with cultural and economic dimensions, and how these ideas are relevant to contemporary environmental discourse in India. To ensure validity and reliability, cross-referencing with existing literature on Hindu ecological thought and nationalist philosophy was conducted. The findings were then organized into thematic

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sections to systematically present Upadhyay's ecological perspectives and their contemporary relevance.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### *NATURE AND NATIONALISM IN MODERN INDIA*

Environmental history emerged as fascinating field of inquiry from the mid-1980s and steadily acquired prominence. Now it established itself as one of the important subfields of Indian history (Ravikumar, 2017). The main focus of this field is to document the relationship between human beings and nature in the past. Environmental history proposes that nature, culture and society have complicated relationship. It has been proposed that Indian culture is inherently bio sensitive and it evolved in tune with ecological complexities and continuous interaction between human beings and natural forms (Gadgil and Guha, 1992). It has been proposed that preservation of ecologically important resources such as water sources, forests, soil, mountains, animals etc. remained as one of the important functions of Hindu culture which internally exercised significant impact upon Indian culture (Chapple, 2000). Some studies have highlighted several examples of this phenomenon such as tree worship, river worship, sacred groves and attribution of sacredness to several living and nonliving entities which played crucial role in influencing human life as part of the Indian culture (Iain, 2011). In sum it has been proposed that Indian culture and civilisation intrinsically imbibed several functional and metaphysical values for preservation of ecology.

The aforementioned argument can be found in the writings of several nationalist thinkers of modern India such as M.K. Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh, Vivekananda and V.D. Savarkar. They attempted to highlight the cultural and spiritual dimension of Indian culture and its extended virtue for preservation of ecology (Bhatt, 2001). Intellectual environmental history as a discipline focuses upon the ideas and practices of intellectuals for reflecting upon the relationship between human beings and nature (McNeill, 2004). The main proposition of nationalist Hindu thinkers is that Hindu religion in general and Indian culture in particular exhibits remarkable sensitivity towards not only limiting the exploitation of nature but also proposes several ethical values to preserve ecologically important resources. It has been argued by environmentalists in general and deep ecologists in particular that we need to revive the values that advocate the organic relationship between human beings and nature preserved by philosophy, religion, culture and others (Deval and Sessions, 2001). It is in this context that necessitated for looking at Hindu values and their ecological dimensions. The ideas of Deen Dayal Upadhyay offer fascinating insights into how Hindu values are equated with Indian values at one level and how such combined Hindu and Indian values reflect the ecological virtues. In other words, the next section of this paper focuses on the ecological dimension of Upadhyay.

#### *ECOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAY*

Generally, two kinds of nationalist thought could be seen in colonial and post-colonial India. Firstly, material nationalist thought which perceives the concept of nationalism as a cementing factor for welding citizens of nation based upon the edifice of common interests mainly in the domains of politics and economy. This kind of nationalism also proposes that the common goal of people in nation is to march towards progress. This kind of concept of nationalism could be seen in the ideas of early nationalist politician such as Dadabhai Nauroji,

Ghokle, Ranade, M.N. Roy, Bhagat Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru and several other leaders represent the Indian National Congress and Communist Party of India (Chandra, 2010, Karmakar, 1974). We also have second type of nationalism which perceives it as expression socio-cultural practices of society as framework of building nation. This approach proposes that the commonality among citizens of nation could be seen in the cultural, spiritual and social domains (Chatterjee, 1993). Nationalism for this approach is nothing but political expression of collectively rooted from socio-cultural and spiritual aspects of life. We also have third type of nationalism which not only advocated cultural roots of nationalism but also prioritises majority culture and based for true nationalism. This approach also advocates for building Indian nation based upon the traditions that are evolved historically in tune with geography rather than borrowed ideas from the west and elsewhere. The ideas of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya falls under the third category of nationalist thought which acquired significance in the contemporary times.

The ideological roots of Upadhyay could be seen in the ideas of following thinkers: Aurobindo Ghosh, V.D. Savarkar, M.S. Golwalker, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Samprasad Mukharjee, Hegdewar etc. The crux of their ideas is that the strong and vibrant India can only be built by the socio-cultural and religious ideas and institutions evolved in India. The faith and obedience to nation acquired sacred proportions in this stream of thought. The political, cultural, social, religious practices and institutions that originate in ancient India were treated as sacred and needed to be adhered for building Bharat by relinquishing the ideas of British and the West. The ecological dimension of this discourse is that the natural entities such as rivers, trees, land, and other acquired sacred status as representative of Indian cultural practices. It would be interesting for us to see how Upadhyay engaged himself with this process and how he attempted to conceptualise the nature from the perspective of Bharatiyata.

The ideas of Upadhyay on the relationship between human beings and nature can be captured from two domains of his thought. Firstly, his conceptualisation of the relationship between culture and society and its engagement with various forms of nature and secondly his ideas on the nature of development process in India with particular reference to the process of decentralised development.

### *INTEGRAL HINDUISM AND NATURE*

M.K Gandhi in his Hind Swaraj attempted to equate Indian culture with Hindu culture. He narrated certain quintessential feature of Indian civilisation. Those are: morality as central to human behaviour, internal happiness rather than happiness derived from consumerism, respecting forms of nature as divine entities and finally following Dharma which promotes social harmony (Parel, 2009). These ideas exercised significant impact upon ideas of Upadhyay on Indian culture. His integral Hinduism is a response to western Philosophy being dominated by to personalities Descartes's dualism and Hegel dialects which treats human beings and socio-cultural process as separate entities. He opposed pluralities and compartmentalisation of human world at one level and bio world at another level. Thereby he proposed integral Hinduism which is a version of bio-monism. The roots of bio-monism could be seen in the classical Greek philosophy and philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya which emphasised on the unified principle that controls the plural nature of universe.

Upadhyay emphasised that Indian philosophy subscribed to integrated perception of human life rather than separating it in multiple way. His main contention was that human beings are not only entities of matter, rather consisted of soul, spirituality and other metaphysical qualities. On this point his ideas can be captured in the following passage:

The first characteristic of Bharatiya culture is that it looks upon life as an integrated whole. It has an integrated view point. To think of parts may be proper for a specialist but it is not useful from the practical standpoint. The confusion in the West arises primarily from its tendency to think of life in sections and then to attempt to put them together by patch work. We do admit that there is diversity and plurality in life but we have always attempted to discover the unity behind them. This attempt is thoroughly scientific. The scientists always attempt to discover order in the apparent disorder in the universe, to find out the principles governing the universe and frame practical rules on the basis of these principles. Chemists discovered that a few elements comprise the entire physical world. Physicists went one step further and showed that even these elements consist only of energy. Today we know that the entire universe is only a form of energy ([www.bjp.org](http://www.bjp.org)).

Upadhyay thus applied unitary theory to look at the social and natural process. He applied this concept to Indian culture and civilisation as a defining feature. And this feature driving and guiding principle of Bharatiyat. From the perceptive Upadhyay proposed that while the West resorted to Darwin's principle of competition and struggle for existence as centrality of human existence, Bharat's culture represent mutual cooperation not the competition.

He proposed that Indian culture rooted in harmonious relationship between human beings and nature and not with struggle with nature. This radical bio-monism could be seen in the following quote: „we in this country saw the basic unity of all life. Even the dualists have believed the nature and spirit to be complementary to each other than conflicting. The diversity in life is merely an expression of the internal unity. There is complementary underlying the diversity. The unit of seed finds expression in various forms – the roots, the trunk, the branches the leaves, the flowers and the fruits of the tree. All these have different forms and colours and even to some extent different properties. Still, we recognise their relation of unity with each other through seed“ ([www.bjp.org](http://www.bjp.org)).

Upadhyay proposes a radical idea on the relationship between human culture and nature. He proposes that nature and its various forms critically influence human culture. This kind of argument was acquired prominence in American environmental history in 1980s. Particularly Donald Wroster proposes that human culture strongly rooted in their relationship with nature (Wroster, 1977). We can imagine who Upadhyay far ahead of his time in establishing the relationship between nature and culture in more scientific and logical way. This can be captured from his following quote:

The recognition of this element of mutual sustenance among different forms of life and taking that as the basis of an effort to make human life mutually sustaining is the prime characteristic of civilization. To mould the nature to achieve the social goals is culture but when this nature leads to social conflict it

is perversion. Culture does not disregard or deny nature. Rather it enhances those elements in nature which are helpful in sustaining life in this universe and making it fuller richer, and curbs others which obstruct or destroy life ([www.bjp.org](http://www.bjp.org))

Human culture and its various forms for Upadhyay is a codified and preserved version of the interaction between human beings and nature. He proposed that the essence of Indian philosophy and way of life could be seen in the principles of Dharma, Artha, Cama and Moksha. For Upadhyay these concepts in India evolved in tune with the attempt of Bharatiyas to accommodate themselves with rhythms of nature with the help of culture they evolved. In sum it is visible in the ideas of Upadhyay that Indian culture and civilisation strongly rooted in ecological interaction of human beings with nature and hence Indian culture is essentially eco-friendly in nature.

#### *ECONOMIC IDEAS OF DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAYA FROM ECOLOGICAL PERCEPTIVE*

Upadhyay indeed represent a unique discourse on the nature of Indian economy. He articulated indigenous model of economic development which take the regional and local requirements into consideration. His economic ideas reflects three core points: firstly, centralised planning and development process essentially an imported model from the West and not compatible with Indian culture and social values, secondly, he argued to make human beings as a basic unit of economics rather than machine and finally he opted for decentralised form of development that would take care of vast diversity of Indian land and people by the way of incorporating local variations into planning process (Sharma, 1990). This section attempts to capture the ecological dimension of Upadhyay's economic thought.

Modern environmentalists without any dispute agree that excessive consumerism is the root cause of most of the environmental problems. Upadhyay was not only engaged with this issue but also proposed Indian centric solution to this problem. He proposes that: „the reality is that the principle of maximum consumption is the root of all worries of the individual and problems of humanity... class struggle which is the foundation of consumerism grows only because of such a consumption“. He thus identified the root of ecological problem driven by industrial and consumeristic model of economic progress. He also proposed a solution to this problem in the following way: „The Indian approach which believes in harmony instead of class struggle contends that we have restricted consumption and made minimum consumption as our ideal instead of maximum through sublimation of natural desires“(Sharma, 1990). Upadhyay thus proposed cultural solution rather than technological solutions to the ecological crisis from Indian perspective.

#### *RELEVANCE OF DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAY'S ECOLOGICAL IDEAS FOR THE PRESENT*

After 1990s decentralised form of management systems for management of natural resources such as forests, water etc introduced in India in a big way. The main justification for this policy shift was that centralised planning and execution unable to bring about expected progress at one level and unable to solve the contention between the state and local population. To undo these problems, it has been proposed that decentralised form of natural resource management policies such as community forest management policies, watershed management



policies, village water bodies" management policies etc. to be introduced. This kind of experiment has been perceived as conducive for effective management of natural resources.

The fact is that Deen Dayal Upadhyay has proposed this model of management in 1960s as a means for effective management of resources. We can capture his ideas on this subject in the following quite: „our goal should be a decentralised economy. We shall have to set up a self-employed sector. The beggar this sector became, the more human progress will be achieved, development will be made and people will become mutually cooperative (Sharma, 1990). In the context of government of India contemplating for more decentralised forms of natural resource management policies, the ideas of Upadhyay are useful for more effective implementation of community based natural resource management policies.

This paper however does not intend to romanticise the ecological wisdom of Upadhyay. His spiritual and metaphysical conceptions of the relationship between human beings and nature in India endorse majority view of Indian culture. He connects the nature and human relationship mainly to elite version of Hindu thought and thereby exclude the non-elitist Hindu traditions at one level and non-Hindu traditions at another level. Consequently, he implicitly or explicitly made the natural forms such as rivers, hills etc as monopoly of elite Hindus. It is natural phenomenon that no philosopher is immune from criticism and shortcomings. In spite of aforementioned criticism, Upadhyay has been one of the important intellectuals of modern India who attempted to humanise Hinduism.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Upadhyay's ideas on culture and economy exhibits remarkable ecological dimension and rooted strongly in commitment for bettering human life. I would like to conclude this paper with the following words of Upadhyaya: "There is a basic equilibrium in nature. Nature replenishes its losses in its own way. But man at present is exploiting it so fast that neither nature can replenish it nor it can sustain its equilibrium. Unfortunately, still man lacks the knowledge of all the aspects of universal reality. These words exhibit a remarkable sensitivity and insight into the cruxes of ecological problem and its remedies by Upadhyaya.

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